

On Our Own Terms: Trans Women Crafting the Meaning of “Woman”

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1. TRANS MEANING CRAFTING: THE IDEA AND THE PRACTICE

Mira Bellwether, *Fucking Trans Women* (2010):¹

“[T]he form of someone’s body doesn’t necessarily determine what that body means, how it works, or what it can do. That is to say that just because what’s in my crotch looks like a penis doesn’t necessarily mean that it works like a penis. In point of fact it doesn’t, at least not most of the time.” (p. 2)

“Being asked to fuck someone with my penis as a cock generally puts me off, and sometimes enough that I get angry or upset. I don’t understand the desire. Or I do, but I’m defiant: why ask for the smaller, unreliable, and most importantly uncooperative cock when there are plenty of dildos available? When I try to force the issue on my penis she is even more defiant: she basically crosses her arms as well, and things get difficult and annoying.” (p. 34)

“I knew early on that while I was into fucking someone with a cock, my penis was only into occasional cock-being. The rest of the time it would rather be a clit, and for the most part that’s how I treat her. She likes to be sucked, rubbed, all of the usual things. . . . I think for both my penis and myself, the part that feels gross is the coercive assumption that because we look like we do, we should want to behave masculinely all of the time.” (p. 33)

Ana Valens:

“Our society thinks a penis is inherently masculine, penetrative, and male. That isn’t true. Just because a girl has a dick doesn’t mean she’s going to insert it into something. It’s better to think about trans women’s dicks as *women’s* genitals. A cis man will have a very different relationship with his junk than a trans woman on HRT.” (her emphasis)²

“Trans women with vaginas have genitals that function similarly to cis women’s, whereas trans women’s penises on HRT are much more analogous to an enormous version of a cis woman’s clitoris. In the latter’s case, our crotches require a soft, smooth touch based on using one’s fingertips.”³

“Outside of ‘girdick,’ ‘clit,’ and ‘outie,’ there’s a long list of words that non-op trans girls draw on to describe their privates, including gender-neutral terms like ‘strapless’ and ‘junk.’ On the other hand, some trans women love using ‘dick’ and ‘cock,’ which is perfectly fine too.”⁴

1. Tragically, Mira passed away last December. Digital copies of her zines are still on sale at <http://fuckingtranswomen.org>. Proceeds help her chosen family pay for her medical and funeral bills.

2. Ana Valens, “Trans/Sex: Here’s What You Need to Know before Having Sex with a Trans Woman,” *Daily Dot*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/trans-sex-myths-sex>.

3. Ana Valens, “Sex with Trans Women 101: A Guide for Queer Cis Women,” *Allure*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.allure.com/story/guide-to-sex-with-trans-women-for-cis-women>.

4. Ana Valens, “Trans/Sex: From ‘Girdick’ to ‘Clit,’ What Trans Women Call Their Genitalia,” *Daily Dot*, December 26, 2018, <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/trans-sex-genitalia-girdick>.

2. THE MEANING OF “WOMAN”: TOP-DOWN VS. BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES

Leading philosophical accounts of “woman” are guided by what I want to think of as a *top-down* approach: they begin with what being a woman means to cis women within dominant cultural spaces and social relations, and then struggle to extend that analysis to trans women (e.g., Haslanger, Jenkins, Saul).

My project: I want to pursue a trans feminist alternative—a *bottom-up* approach that takes up trans women’s own attempts to make sense of our bodies and ourselves on our own terms.

- a) Bodies do not have to take on the meaning imposed onto them by dominant social structures and relations.

“I needed a word to directly identify the sensitive, fleshy tube of flesh with all the nerves and blood vessels in it. Not everybody uses the same word for this part of their body. I mostly call mine my clit, for instance, but at different times it can be different things. When I am at the doctor’s office the word I use is also penis, but not because I believe that’s the *right* word for it.” (Bellwether, *FTW*, p. 14, my emphasis)

“Now imagine a context in which we are medical professionals screening for testicular cancer. . . . In this context, Beau says ‘We should test Amanda, because Amanda is a man.’ In this context, Beau’s utterance is true, because Amanda meets the ‘man’ definition: what matters in this conversation is not self-identification but the presence of testicles.” (Jennifer Saul, “Politically Significant Terms,” p. 202)

“If you make the leap and identify me as female, then, in fact, my genitalia are a woman’s genitalia, however twisted and uncommonly formed, no matter my *ovaries external*, my lips closed/fused shut, my vagina/uterus imprisoned and atrophied, my urethra inside my unseemly clit. My genitalia may be classified female genitalia if I am female, no matter how unusual they may appear, how peculiar they are.” (Tala Brandeis, “Dyke with a Dick,” in *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader*, p. 55, my emphasis)

- b) The terms and meanings that trans people craft for our own bodies better explain salient aspects of gender reality as trans people know and live it.

“So, when [the leatherdyke conference] Powersurge defined a woman as someone who could slam her dick into a drawer without hurting it, a common response among some butch leatherdykes and some ftms was to say that it sure would hurt if their dicks got slammed into a drawer; a dildo may not be a dick only in the conception, it may be a dick *phenomenologically* as well.” (C. Jacob Hale, “Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies,” p. 230, my emphasis)

“She reached inside the opening of her boxers and pulled out one of the most perfect dicks I’ve ever laid eyes on. . . . [A]nd her hand fit around it as if it belonged there. She resumed stroking it and I sat there in amazement, watching someone else do what I thought I alone had done.” (D. Alexandria, “Butches Don’t,” in *Best Lesbian Erotica 2006*, p. 28)

“Trans women take their claims of womanhood to be substantive, rather than merely claims about what sentences they’re disposed to accept. They think that when they

begin to self-identify as women this is made true by their womanhood, rather than the other way around.” (Jennifer Saul, “Politically Significant Terms,” p. 206)

- c) On the bottom-up view, “woman” means, and properly means, what trans feminism, not the dominant cisheterosexist society, makes of it.

“It is a fact that in some trans community contexts, the meanings of gender terms (such as ‘woman’) are altered and their extensions broadened. This is a two-step process. First, ‘trans woman’ is taken as a basic expression, not as a qualification of the dominant meaning of ‘woman.’” (Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trans Women and the Meaning of ‘Woman,’” p. 240)

“The second step is that being a trans woman is a sufficient condition for being a woman. ‘Woman’ is then taken to apply to both trans and non-trans women. . . . Indeed, we end up with a notion of ‘woman’ on which a trans woman is a paradigmatic (rather than a borderline) case. . . . The same shift can occur with terms such as ‘female’ and ‘male.’” (Bettcher, p. 241)

“I wonder if this is one of the reasons why some people hate trans people with such a passion. . . . Not because we have failed at trying to live by society’s gendered rules, but because we have broken these rules and still found happiness. . . . Not having the safety of wider society, we have built places of safety for each other. Not seeing ourselves reflected in the outside world, we have learned how to trust in each other’s reflections.” (CN Lester, *Trans like Me*, p. 131)

3. TRANS MEANING CRAFTING: THE METAPHYSICS

As I see it, the practice of trans meaning crafting can be vindicated metaphysically by a reformulation of the now broadly accepted sex/gender distinction, where gender is understood as the *social meaning* of sex.

- a) *Social meaning as a matter of bodily interpretation*: Much of the social meaning central to trans meaning crafting is hardly gender roles, gender norms, gendered social positions, gender identities, or feminine/masculine aesthetic ideals; rather, it concerns more broadly our *interpretation* of bodies (e.g., having this body part *means* having a clit, and that *means* having a woman’s and even a female body).

I propose that we think of “social meaning” as a catch-all for all the social notions, assumptions, understandings, and implications socially assumed to pertain to, or follow from, the relevant (e.g., observed, expected, suspected, or imagined) trait.

Social meaning, understood expansively like this, is fundamental to the oppression targeted at transgender women because of our gender: having this body part *means* one has a penis, and that *means* one is both male and a man, whose mere presence in a women’s space *means* an inherent penetration of that space; rejecting that meaning, however, *means* one is either up to no good (*why else* must you use a women’s bathroom?), or worse, miserably confused (isn’t gender *just* asocial construct? why can’t we all *just* be human beings?).

- b) *Sex as the social meaning of sexual and reproductive bodies*: The sex of a body is a matter of its being *interpreted as sexed* one way or another; gender is its higher-order social meaning (analogy: citizenship status).

“[F]or most of us there is a relatively fixed interpretation of our bodies as sexed either male or female, an interpretation that marks us within the dominant ideology as eligible for only certain positions or opportunities in a system of sexist oppression.” (Haslanger, “Gender and Race,” p. 42)

4. TRANS MEANING CRAFTING: THE METASEMANTICS AND THE POLITICS

Bettcher finds in trans people’s alternative gender practice an argument for what she calls a *multiple-meaning* view on gender terms such as “woman”: for her, any adequate account of “woman” must acknowledge that the term “woman” has not one but multiple meanings—at least, a dominant meaning and a “resistant, subcultural,” or “subaltern” one.

“So this conflict of meaning is undergirded by a conflict in gender practice. . . . There is a *genuine* dispute concerning two competing visions of gender. And the taken-for-granted assumption that the dominant cultural view is *the only valid one* can be seen as a kind of cultural arrogance bolstered by institutional power.” (Bettcher, “Meaning,” p. 242, my emphasis)

I don’t think this is the best way to make good on trans people’s meaning crafting practice; the bottom-up view I defend is a *single-meaning* view.

The dominant-meaning component of the multiple-meaning view does no explanatory work: with or without the dominant meaning, it is the trans feminist meaning that grounds trans people’s genders and the terms that properly describe them.

Keeping that dominant-meaning component then positions the dominant, cisheterosexist meaning as on a par with the subaltern, trans feminist meaning, granting it a legitimacy it does not deserve.

5. ON OUR OWN TERMS

Trans meaning crafting practice does not simply uncover the dominant meaning of bodies as a social imperative only cleverly disguised as biology.

More importantly, through this debunking project, we get to invent and reinvent interpretations that in fact work for, not root against, our bodies. Trans feminism must work to take up and speak to lived trans lives on our own terms.

In trans feminist spaces, trans bodies are not simply *included*; sometimes, it is cis bodies that stand out as presumptively funny, turned upside down, tucked inside out—all perfectly legitimate and lovable.

In Michelle Tea’s words,

“I believe that sex and writing can save people, especially queer people, because it shoots our lives up with hot, crucial meaning and gives us the power to *create* and *recreate* that meaning, even after the girl is gone and your heart is broken and your sheets are ruined forever.” (Introduction to *Best Lesbian Erotica 2004*, p. xiii, my emphasis)